

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-1

NEW YORK TIMES
29 MARCH 1983

U.S. Refusing to Dispel Impression It Is Helping Anti-Sandinist Forces

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 28 — Reagan Administration officials acknowledged today that they were doing nothing to dispel the impression that the United States is covertly supporting anti-Sandinist forces fighting in Nicaragua.

One official said that by allowing this impression to persist, the Administration hoped to cause problems for the Nicaraguan leadership and to persuade it to diminish its backing for guerrilla forces in El Salvador.

Amid repeated press reports and Nicaraguan Government allegations of Central Intelligence Agency backing for anti-Sandinist forces operating principally from Honduras, the State Department has steadfastly refused to deny or confirm American involvement.

But Administration officials conceded that the pointed refusal of the Administration to deny United States involvement has had the effect of seemingly substantiating the reports.

"It is a longstanding practice of this and other Administrations not to address allegations of this sort," Alan D. Romberg, a department spokesman, said today.

Mr. Romberg said he was authorized to offer a statement suggesting that the problems faced by the Nicaraguan Government were caused by its own internal opposition and its own repression. By implication, this was meant to suggest that the anti-Sandinist forces were a kind of local opposition.

Opposition 'Making Pressure Felt'

"It is a fact," Mr. Romberg said, "that over preceding months there has been rising opposition to the Government of Nicaragua, including within Nicaragua itself, and clearly these opposition elements are making their pressure felt both outside and within Nicaragua itself."

"And it is not surprising," he went on, "that the Sandinists are trying to convince their public and the outside world that there is not an internal problem in Nicaragua when there is." He said the "opposition" ranged from "disillusioned public sectors to ethnic groups such as the Miskito Indians and includes former National Guardsmen and former Sandinists."

Mr. Romberg, summing up the state of the opposition in Nicaragua, said it was "diverse, nationalist and independent."

An Administration official acknowledged that there was "a bit of psychological warfare here." The United States, the official said, is interested in raising doubts in the minds of Nicaraguan leaders about the extent of Washington's involvement in the hope that this will force the Nicaraguans to agree to stop their aid for the insurgents fighting in El Salvador against the American-backed Government.

In this "psychological warfare," the State Department seems to be repeating what the Nicaraguans say about the situation in El Salvador. The Nicaraguans have said that the guerrillas in El Salvador are acting on their own and reflect opposition to the regime.

A reporter for The New York Times visited a camp Saturday inside Honduras where there were armed people, one of whom said they were all Nicaraguans. The reporter described crates in the camp that were labeled as United States-made armaments.

Two Honduran soldiers stationed nearby described the people in the camp as Nicaraguans fighting to overthrow the Sandinist Government.

No Comment on Equipment

When asked about this today, Mr. Romberg said he would "not address it one way or the other." Asked how the insurgents could get American-made equipment, he said, "There is a variety of ways of getting arms in the open market."

A reporter complained to Mr. Romberg that what he called the Administration's lack of candor on whether the

United States is instigating or supporting the insurgency in Nicaragua was "unacceptable." Mr. Romberg replied: "That may be your judgment. In terms of any operations or intelligence activity, there is appropriate oversight undertaken by Congress."

Secretary of State George P. Shultz, when he was on Capitol Hill last week testifying on aid to El Salvador, refused to answer when asked whether the United States was involved in support for Nicaraguan insurgents. He said the matter was being handled in secret with the Intelligence Committees of the House and the Senate.

The Honduran Government has denied that any anti-Nicaraguan forces are using its territory, despite The Times's account of the camp some eight miles from the border.

Honduras issued a statement last week similar to what Mr. Romberg said today, asserting that the problems in Nicaragua were "due to the increasing political and social tensions between the Nicaraguan Government and the opposition groups of all political tendencies."